Launceston Elliot (1874-1930) came from a well known and noble Scottish family and his name is to be found in *Debrett's Illustrated Peerage*, showing his direct relationship to the Earl of Minto. His daughter, Nancy Maud, told me he also had some Australian blood and his granddaughter, Ann, who was my house-guest earlier this year, related some fascinating tales of his adventures ‘down under’.

Elliot was conceived in Launceston, Tasmania, hence his rather unusual name, and he was born on the ninth of June, 1874, in India, where his father was a magistrate. Father Elliot was married twice, his first wife having fallen or thrown herself off a balcony while in Australia. Mr. Elliot went back to marry the receptionist of the hotel where they were staying and Launceston was a product of this second marriage. By the time his family returned to the U.K. to farm in Essex, Launceston was already a very hefty and strong thirteen year old, a pupil of Eugen Sandow.

The world’s first proper national weightlifting championship was held in January 1891, in the International Hall of the Cafe Monica, Piccadilly, London, and amongst the twenty entrants and twelve starters was Launceston Elliot, now aged 16. He performed with credit and three years later he won a similar National Championships at the Royal Aquarium, Westminster. This event was more on the lines of weightlifting today, decided on aggregate poundage—although there were eight lifts instead of the two we have now.

On this occasion the twenty year old was well ahead of his rivals, being the best in the vast majority of lifts. He grew rapidly in stature and in reputation, culminating in his Olympic victory, when he won for Britain the first Olympic gold medal for weightlifting. The scene was Athens, Greece in April 1896 when Baron Pierre de Coubertin revived the Olympic Games. Weightlifting was supervised by Crown Prince George of Greece and Elliot did a one hand lift of 71 kilos (156 1/2 pounds) to win that event. An official report proclaimed “This young gentleman attracted universal attention by his uncommon type of beauty. He was of imposing stature, tall, well proportioned, his hair and complexion of surprising fairness.” Elsewhere he was proclaimed as “the finest man of English birth,” completely ignoring his true heritage. The popular press of the day revealed that his handsome figure had procured for him an offer of marriage from a highly placed lady admirer.

Young Elliot had wide-ranging athletic tastes: discus throwing...
at track and field meets, participating in Greco-Roman and other types
of wrestling matches, bodybuilding competitions, etc.; and corre-
spondence with his family tells of him practicing the traditional
Scottish Highland Games activities, including tossing the caber
with his friends Roland and Algernon Spencer.

In 1898 Elliot won what was the first major physique contest,
rue in conjunction with the national weightlifting championships
of that year. In his prime Launceston Elliot stood six feet two inches
and weighed 224 pounds. He had a 50-54 inch chest and 18 1/2 inch
arms, good even by today’s standards. His forearms were 15 1/2
inches, thighs 28 inches and waist 36 inches.

Launceston also performed as a professional strongman in later
years. His presentation started with a popular posing routine, in-
terpreting well known classical statues. Having demonstrated his mus-
cles he then went on to show his strength. His wife, Rose Amelia,
went everywhere with him and often they were accompanied by their
three daughters, including Nancy Maud, who became my pen-friend
from the 1960s until the 1980s. In one of her many letters (26th Jan-
uary, 1981) she told me that “Uncle Roland Spencer...tied to per-
suade the family to put me into training.” The best known by her was the Spinning Cyclists. She wrote to me about this, even
doing a little drawing to clarify the description. The strong man sup-
ported a yoke across his shoulders and from this wires were attached
for effect, continued to pedal furiously. The faster he spun the wider
they swung until they were almost horizontal. “I would cover my
eyes for fear that there would be an accident,” said Nancy Maud, who
herself became quite an actress. The orchestra pit would seem per-
ence. He did quite a lot human lifting in the act rather than using
iron weights.

Launceston Elliot was greatly encouraged by his father, a small,
pale but highly intelligent and energetic man. He was intensely inter-
ested in weightlifting and strength, greatly assisting his son through-
out Launceston’s amateur and professional career. When Launces-
ton was concentrating prior to lifting.

The Olympic medalist matured into a merry character but had a
quick and fiery temper, although he was careful not to use his fists.
He was extremely light of foot, as could be seen in Cumberland
and Westmoreland wrestling, Greco Roman and Catch-as-Catch-
Can. He practiced all these styles but hated professional all-in
wrestling.

This great strongman toured Britain and the continent for more
than a decade, being a particular hit in Paris and at Berlin’s Winter
Garden in 1912, at this time employing twelve pretty girls as assis-
tants. Nancy Maud wrote that he retired from the stage after this
but his grand-daughter Ann Elliot-Smith told me he did shows show-
wards, even in the early 1920s, and also appeared in South America.

Women as well as men flocked to see him and the ladies were for-
ever inviting him for cocktails, etc. He broke many British weightlift-
ning records but he was not a specialist. He loved all kinds of strength
athletics so people were not surprised when in 1901 he decided to
become a professional strongman—but there was more to it than that.
Nancy Maud told me the real reason her father took up his profes-
sional status. When Elliot married he got a stud farm, “Teddingbury”
in Herts, as a wedding present from his father. Old man Elliot, how-
ever, never passed on the deeds to his son and three or four years later he
told them that the farm would have to be sold as since retiring he
had been gambling on the Stock Exchange and lost heavily. He told
Launceston that he could bring his family to Highfield, Nottingham,
Kent, and all live together there. Launceston told him what he could do
with that idea and instead took his wife to her own father, a vicar
in Lee, Kent, and called in old Bill Klein, who had coached him to
victory in Athens, to help devise an act.

In this first presentation he lifted his wife as the Statue of Libery,
and was partnered by his old pal Montague Spencer, one of four
weightlifting brothers. Soon Mrs. Elliot became pregnant and Nancy
Maud said, “As soon as I began to show my mark my mother had to
retire.” To contrast with his own very fair complexion Elliot used
eight to four superbly built black men as well as three or four white
men. The whites dressed in white Roman togas and the black men
wore leopard skins. This mixed troupe was a permanent part of the
act and traveled with him, but he also hired eight other people at each
town. The local eight were dressed in sailor outfits and as one of the
main stunts Launceston Elliot would, with the refined aplomb of a
born aristocrat in all his movements, lift and support all 16 men at the
same time.

As soon as the act became a success, old man Elliot came back on
the scene and persuaded Launceston to move to Highfield in Not-
tingham and leave the children there during the strongman’s over-
seas tours. Launceston was always top of the bill and sometimes
the youngsters would be taken by their grandmother to Germany, Hol-
lund, etc., visiting their parents during extended seasons.

When Elliot’s professional career was over, he became a gentle-
mans farmer and in 1923 he moved to Melbourne, Australia. Laun-
ceston Elliot’s weight increased to 22 stone (308 pounds) and he died
in Sydney on August 8, 1930 as a result of a cancerous growth in the
spine. He is interred in New South Wales. Elliot’s daughter told me
that his best medals and much of their memorabilia were taken by
Malcolm Halsey, who married into the family and later left. The Mel-
bourne police were actually put to work on this but without result. I
believe Halsey was Nancy Maud’s brother-in-law, married to her sis-
ter Kathleen.

Looking very much like Sandow, although much larger, Laun-
ceston Elliot was one of the most respected figures in the world of
strength at the turn of the century when this form of entertainment
was at its height.

1 David Webster, The Iron Game (Irvine: by the author, 1976), 24-5.